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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000745

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SUBJECT: PJD LEADERS AND AMBASSADOR DISCUSS TERRORISM,  
ELECTIONS, AND SAHARA

REF: RABAT 549

Classified by Ambassador Thomas Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The leadership of the Islam-oriented Party of Justice and Development told the Ambassador on April 17 that all Moroccans condemned the recent terrorist attacks against U.S. facilities in Casablanca, but said that feelings of "injustice" prompted by U.S. policies in the region were a factor nourishing terrorism. In the coming elections, combatting public corruption and spurring economic development will be the centerpieces of the party's platform. They strongly supported the GOM's approach on Sahara and acknowledged good relations with moderate Algerian Islamic parties. End summary.

12. (C) In the latest in a series of calls on leaders of major political parties, the Ambassador met on April 17 with the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), the Islam-oriented opposition party widely expected to outperform most if not all other parties in the September legislative elections. Party Chairman Saad Eddine Al-Othmani and his two principal deputies, Abdullah Baha and Lahcen Daoudi (also Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies), and PJD foreign relations staffer Reda Benkhaldoun, welcomed the Ambassador, Polcouns and D/Polcouns to PJD headquarters in Central Rabat.

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Terror, Morocco, and U.S. Policy  
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13. (C) Othmani condemned the April 14 suicide bombings against the U.S. Consulate-General in Casablanca and the (private) American Language Center just a block away and expressed relief that they had been unsuccessful (only the two suicide bombers were killed, with one bystander slightly injured, septels). "All Moroccans reject this terror," he continued, even in neighborhoods close to the recent flashpoints in Casablanca, life is going on, people are determined not to give in to fear.

14. (C) Daoudi speculated on the terrorists' motivation, opining that "economics didn't explain these incidents at all," and asserting that flawed religious ideology was the principal factor. "We must vaccinate our youth against extremism," Othmani asserted, using a standard PJD formulation on the need for mandatory "moderate" Islamic education in schools.

15. (C) The PJD leaders cited "sentiments of injustice" among youth as one of the principal factors causing terror. "The U.S. should change its policies...Moroccans have nothing against the U.S.," we admire you in many ways, "...but we feel solidarity with all Muslims," Daoudi maintained, citing Palestine and Iraq. "U.S. policy is causing a lot of anger...we are concerned about it," they asserted.

16. (C) The PJD leaders rejected polcouns' assertion that U.S. policy in the region has evolved in recent years. "Only the Congress has changed, the Administration is the same," Baha argued. Othmani agreed, claiming the Secretary's efforts to revive the Arab-Israeli peace process have borne no fruit, "she can make 1000 trips, but it will make no difference." The lack of justice for detainees in Guantanamo is "incomprehensible," Othmani asserted. Fondly recalling his visit to Washington (on the International Visitor's program) in the summer of 2006, Othmani said he had been encouraged by meetings he had with members of Congress who openly opposed the administration's foreign policy.

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Electoral Program: Focus on Economy, Anti-Corruption  
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17. (C) The PJD is still finalizing its formal 2007 electoral program, but its basic outlines will not depart from the party's longstanding positions, Othmani told the Ambassador. For the PJD, economic issues predominate. The trade balance remains terrible, and official statistics showing a drop in the unemployment rate are misleading, Othmani asserted - Morocco is not becoming more competitive. Othmani and Daoudi expressed general disbelief of government statistics on illiteracy and investment. The government's figures for unemployment are based on shrinkage of the workforce due to emigration and overcount temporary employment in the agricultural sector, Othmani said, also questioning the government's claim of 8 percent GDP growth in 2006.

18. (C) Administrative and judicial corruption are crippling economic development, Othmani continued, "unless there is

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profound reform, we will never be able to invigorate the economy... Eight percent growth is good, but how much is being stolen?" Baha amplified the point, "there is no integrated plan to fight corruption. New laws (such as the recent declaration of assets bill) are not sufficient, Baha opined, the problem is not the lack of laws against corruption but the government's failure to apply them. Othmani blamed low foreign investment on the lack of transparency and corruption in the judiciary, and the consequent opportunities for corruption. The party's platform, Othmani claimed, would fight promote transparency and combat favoritism and nepotism in the government.

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Crippling Balkanization  
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19. (C) The PJD leaders complained about the changes to the electoral code recently passed by the parliament and the government's gerrymandering of electoral districts. The reallocation of seats from urban to rural districts was made at the PJD's expense, they charged. The system is still structured to encourage a diffusion of representation in the parliament. "Fourteen parties can not pursue a courageous policy program," Daoudi asserted. The decision earlier this year by the Constitutional Council, striking down the electoral code's three percent threshold for party participation in the elections, would only aggravate the "balkanization" of the Moroccan political landscape, he observed. (Comment: When the original draft electoral bill was presented earlier this year, the PJD sided with small parties who termed the threshold "undemocratic," against the larger parties of the ruling coalition who had sponsored the idea. For the PJD to now complain about the implications of the course they supported is disingenuous. End comment.)

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Sahara: PJD Supports the GOM, Suspicious of Algiers  
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¶10. (C) The PJD leaders said they were encouraged by recent developments in the Sahara diplomatic process. "Autonomy is the sole (workable) solution," they opined. Autonomy for the Sahara will presage a new age of governance in Morocco characterized by general decentralization and empowerment of regions, they predicted. The PJD leaders speculated that the Algerian government did not really want the Sahara problem to go away - it is a staple of the military regime's diet, they asserted. Like the Islamist terror insurgency, Sahara gives the generals of Algiers a pretext to retain their grip on power, Daoudi suggested. "Morocco and Mauritania are leading the way to democracy" in the Maghreb region, Othmani observed, Tunisia and Algeria are falling behind.

¶11. (C) In response to a question from polcouns, the PJD leaders asserted that they had good relations with the moderate Islamic parties in Algeria and had recently hosted a delegation of Algerian counterparts. (Note: They did not mention, but we recently heard, that Othmani himself had also gone to Algeria. End note.)

¶12. (C) On the way out, the Ambassador asked Othmani if the PJD had any plans for alliances with other parties. "Not until after the elections," he quickly responded.

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